

Business Correspondence by Fax: Some Ideas on Why and How to Teach it

By Barry Warwick and Sonya Bertini

This article explains how we have attempted to deal with a problem we have encountered when teaching corporate language students how to write business correspondence. Despite teaching in a number of multinational companies, we find that the story is always the same. Students indicate that their needs in areas such as using the telephone and socializing are being met, but they are dissatisfied with the writing components of courses. They repeatedly make the point that the model letters presented in textbooks bear little resemblance to the type of correspondence they handle at work. They mention the fax as the written medium they work with most.

We will briefly describe some research (Warwick 1992) carried out to discover what people in business really are writing, then move on to consider how well textbooks cover this area and finally, present one possible approach to teaching fax writing.

The Research

The main method of investigation was via a questionnaire. Questions focused on finding out how common media such as letters, telex, and fax are used in business correspondence, and when and why one medium might be preferred to another. This questionnaire was sent to over 30 people working in multinational companies in both Europe and the United States. The respondents included secretarial and managerial level employees. Interviews were also conducted with "specialist informants" (Selinker 1979) working in offices; these were people who were willing to talk about their work and could be thought of as experts due to the fact that they write and receive correspondence daily. These informants provided a real insider's view on business correspondence, enabling us to clarify doubts raised by answers to the questionnaire.

The final method of investigation was a corpus of around 200 faxes. These faxes represented the solid evidence to complement the information obtained through the questionnaire and interviews.

Results of the Research

The results of the research could not have been clearer. The fax is, without doubt, the most common medium of written communication in the business world. The telex and the posted letter are less frequently used in business circles nowadays. Indeed, even electronic mail, which will probably become the medium of the future, but is at present only used by a minority of companies, has already outstripped letters and telex.

It should be remembered that this research was restricted to multinational companies. Almost all of the correspondence considered here was inter-office-faxes sent from one company branch to another, for example, from Frankfurt to Minneapolis. Employees of multinational corporations seem to write almost exclusively to other employees within the organization. Communication between companies on a national level tends to be written in the local language, and is not a problem for the EFL teacher.

Textbook Research

Armed with this information, we embarked upon a secondary level of research to see how well textbooks on business correspondence prepared students for the real business environment. Past experience had made us pessimistic that textbooks would accurately reflect current practices. This situation is reminiscent of the research done by Williams (1988) into the language used in business meetings. She found that there was very little correlation between the language presented in textbooks and what business people actually said in meetings. The intention here is to answer the same question which Williams posed, "Is there anything in common?"-in this instance, between the situation presented in textbooks and what our research revealed.

Results of the Textbook Research

A quick check through the books presently on sale revealed that in most cases the focus was almost entirely on business letters. Typically the fax was either not mentioned at all, or given no more than peripheral treatment. Without wishing to pick on any books, we would like to cite some of the books we reviewed.

Writing for Business, by Martin Wilson (1987), and *Company to Company*, by Andrew Littlejohn (1988), are two cases in point. These books potentially shield themselves from criticism by stating that they are primarily concerned with letters. It is clear that letters are seen as the basic, most common element in business correspondence. *Company to Company* elaborates on this point by explaining that memos, for example, are not included as "the course is intended to teach correspondence between companies rather than within companies" (1988:11). While one welcomes some explanation of the inclusion or exclusion of items from books, it is still possible to take issue with the decision. If the interoffice fax is the most common type of correspondence, why is it being ignored?

Two other books can be cited. *Secretarial Contacts*, by Nick Brieger and Andrew Cornish (1989), is one of the few books to specifically mention the fax. Unfortunately, however, this mention is restricted to a reading passage on office equipment, and offers no real information on how or when the fax is used. Indeed, the explanation of the fax's function is limited to one line, "it is for sending copies of documents, etc." (1989:15). Once again, no comment is made on the

fax's role as the number one medium of business correspondence. It is simply regarded as another piece of office equipment.

Our final example has been included to show that there are some brighter spots in this generally disappointing examination of textbooks. The revised edition of *A Handbook of Commercial Correspondence* (Ashley 1992) contains a chapter on electronic correspondence which looks at the fax, electronic mail, telegrams, cables, and the telex. Unfortunately, coverage is restricted to some general comments on what a fax is, and only a few examples are given.

The general tenor of comments in this section has been negative. Maybe it is time to reiterate that our purpose has not been to rubbish or ridicule any textbooks, but to put the spotlight on what the books claim to be doing and what they omit. In answering the question "is there anything in common?" then, the response must be that there are certainly some elements in common, but not by any means as many as there could or should be. Ashley's book shows that the fax is finally beginning to creep into the most recently published books, but that there are still no books which systematically attempt to teach how to write a fax. It is to this problem that we shall now turn.

A Response

The problem was now clear. Our students needed work on writing faxes, yet published textbooks provided almost no guidance in this area. The onus was on us to develop our own course in fax writing. We will describe here the approach which we adopted—one that we found to be simple, yet effective.

The approach can be divided into four steps. First, faxes were put into categories based on what function they were carrying out. Next, the faxes in each category were broken down into their constituent parts, to show the basic organizational pattern of a fax message. Third, each category was examined for typical language. Finally, we turned the students loose and invited them to write their own faxes.

Step 1: Fax categories. After studying the corpus of faxes, which contained examples from both native and non-native writers, three major functional categories emerged: requests, replies, and informing. The central criterion for the final category was that no reply was required; classifying faxes as either requests or replies proved straightforward. This broad division was accepted and recognized by our students.

Step 2: Breakdown of the three functional categories. We now took our students through what the research had revealed as the basic organizational pattern of each type of fax. For example, the following four-step pattern was observed in request faxes:

1. An opening section providing the background context to the forthcoming request.
2. The request or action line—usually one sentence which states what exactly is being requested.

3. A thank you line-usually expressing gratitude in advance for the recipient's fulfilling of the request.
4. A closing salutation or sign off line.

TO: Laura Hess
FROM: Anne Deschamps
DATE: October 24, 1994

FAX : 202-555-1234

The following number of PIMs were ordered in the Spanish and Italian languages:

	Spanish	Italian*
Legend Plus	60	53
DPDT	—	23
OxyElite	40	53

*3 of each were ordered by Switzerland.

Given these low quantities, Marketing Europe (John Hunt) wonders whether we should go through the effort and expense of doing Spanish and Italian translations of the PIM at all.

Therefore, we would like to know whether you could manage with English language PIMs for these products in your country?

Please provide us with your input on this by fax as soon as possible.

If you have any questions, please call.

Thanks in advance.

Best regards,

Anne Deschamps

In "reply faxes," a three-step pattern was observed:

1. A section or line referring to the previous communication.
2. The answer section, containing the information which was requested.
3. A closing salutation or "sign off" line.

These patterns were presented to students by showing them transparencies of authentic faxes from the corpus and pointing out the various steps. We should stress here that our presentation of these patterns was not in any way prescriptive. The patterns were explained as basic formats, but

ones which were often changed to suit different contextual situations or writers' idiosyncrasies. To this end, faxes which conformed to the patterns, and those which omitted or added elements, were shown. This provided students with an opportunity to discuss why certain additions or omissions had been made (maybe contextual factors, or to whom the writer is writing, etc.), but did not destroy the idea that there is an underlying structure for fax writing. At this point it should also be reiterated that the faxes we showed to our students were both native and nonnative examples. We found this to be positive and useful. By examining nonnative examples, students were able to identify with the style of writing and even with some of the mistakes. They could pick out and correct awkward statements as well as grammar or vocabulary mistakes, something which they found quite enjoyable! The use of these faxes also served to compare content and style in the writing of nonnative and native speakers; interestingly, many similarities were found.

To ensure that students had properly understood the organizational patterns, we finished this step with a jumbled fax activity. Students were presented with faxes which had been cut up into sections corresponding to the basic patterns. They then had to identify the fax as a request, a reply or an informing fax, and put it back into its original order.

Step 3: The language of each step. Students were next asked to brainstorm any functional expressions or language which they would expect to find in the various parts of a fax. This entailed considering how they would greet the addressee, what construction or language they would use for the request line, and so on.

As this is not the place to elaborate on our findings, we will limit ourselves to a few brief comments. Broadly speaking, the faxes in the corpus were written in a direct, fairly informal style. Examples of this would be the frequency of the Please + IMPERATIVE structure, as in "please let me know whether...", and the use of first names ("Frank..."), without titles or "dear...", as an address form.

Despite being generally informal, however, we must also point out that a noticeable characteristic of fax language was the mixed formality levels which often appeared either between faxes, or even within one message. Thus, while writers might use a first name address form and a Please + IMPERATIVE action line, they might equally well include a more formal "if you have any questions please do not hesitate to call," line. This trend was seen in both native and nonnative faxes. One can only speculate as to why this occurs. One explanation could be that writers are confused by the fax's speed, which makes it more like a telephone call than a written message. This speed aspect produces the informal language, while the written aspect may encourage the inclusion of more formal expressions. Regardless of whether this is the case or not, the variety of language found in faxes need not cause any great difficulties in terms of teaching. As in step 2, the emphasis is not on how a fax must be written, but on what is typical in today's business world. One can explain that in general the language is informal, but that a number of more traditional, letter-like phrases still tend to be included. Students can be shown how they are typically written and then be guided towards finding a style they are comfortable with.

After brainstorming their own functional expressions, we took the students back through the authentic fax transparencies in order to look at and discuss the language used. This process can be supplemented by producing a handout of common expressions seen in faxes.

Step 4: Writing your own fax. The students have now seen different kinds of faxes and the way they are organized. The language used in each stage of a fax message has also been considered. All that is left is for them to get practice in writing their own. We gave our students realistic situations from their work and asked them to write the appropriate fax. If both teacher and student can be reached by fax, the authenticity of this exercise can be extended by asking students to fax the teacher messages as part of their homework.

Once this introductory look at faxes has been completed, succeeding classes can be dedicated to remedial workshop sessions. Students can bring in their own authentic faxes and these can be used as the basis for discussion and improvement or correction activities.

Conclusion

What we have presented in this article is our response to a problem that we believe is widespread in business writing courses. Our students reacted very positively to our focus on faxes and our particular method of presenting them. Using authentic native and nonnative examples of fax messages played a major role in obtaining this positive response.

We have deliberately not said much about what our investigations of faxes revealed in order to focus more upon developing a methodology for teaching how to write them. The onus is on teachers to get out and do their own research. Ours has been limited to the US/western European situation. Though we are confident that our findings are typical of what is taking place in today's business correspondence, it is important that teachers investigate the needs of their own students. This is particularly so as textbooks seem to be letting us down at the moment. Publishers are far too slow in responding to the changing face of today's business world. Tebeaux has it right when she stresses that "we must constantly attempt to reassess course content by continuing to ask our students already on the job, 'How useful are the skills you learned? How can we make our writing courses more relevant in preparing students for the work place?'" Hopefully the research and methodology described here will encourage teachers and publishers alike to undertake more such basic research to keep up-to-date with our students' needs.

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References

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